

endangered craft and advancing its criticality may not only foster greater appreciation but also influence local and national policy to safeguard these graphic traditions as heritage assets.

This paper examines the interplay of Malayalam and Latin scripts in Kerala's public spaces, where the state's official language coexists with English. It explores the regional identity formed through typographic practices, the impact of signage on place-making, and the coexistence of multiple scripts in everyday life. This study is based on field observations, and archival research. Public signage not only serves an informational function but also fosters familiarity by associating certain styles, materials, and colors with specific businesses. Hand-painted and three-dimensional signs, being more sustainable than short-lived digital prints, carry stories of the place they belong to. Over time these type specimens transform from mere communication and promotional tools to being a part of the space.

2. Creating a Regional Identity

Typography in public spaces reflects the cultural and social fabric of a region (Sugita, 2018). Malayalam, the official language of Kerala and the major mode of communication for its populations, naturally dominates the state's public signs scene. This linguistic presence is not only functional, but also inextricably linked to the region's cultural and visual character. When handwritten styles are used in signage, the naturally rounded structure of Malayalam letterforms is important in establishing the aesthetic. These curves allow painters and signwriters to write letters in a flowing motion without constantly lifting their writing tools, resulting in a distinct, uninterrupted rhythm in the script's visual appearance.

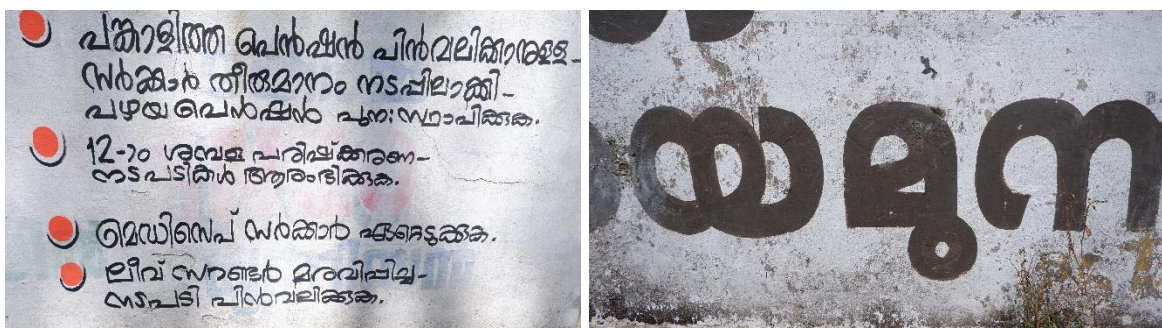


Figure.1&2 Monolinear strokes of Malayalam hand-lettering, written without lifting the tool for each letter, Thiruvalla, Kerala

This trait not only strengthens the script's distinct identity, but it's influence extends to the impact it has on the areas it inhabits. Malayalam signage helps to create a sense of place by incorporating linguistic and cultural cues into the physical environment. The way

it is written, stylized, and utilized in diverse contexts helps to determine the identity of areas, enterprises, industries, and even the nature of discourse within various sectors. In this way, the script transcends its role as a mere communication tool and becomes an active participant in shaping Kerala's visual and cultural landscape.

2.1 Typography as Place-Making

While Malayalam serves as a unifying element across Kerala's public signage, variations in style emerge due to regional sign-painting traditions (Bhattathiri, 2021). Commercial signboards exhibit a diverse range of styles, whereas government signage follows strict guidelines that reinforce a typographic identity. Examples include KSRTC bus nameboards, government office signboards, and Forest Department signage. For instance, a rectangular board with green and red diagonal halves is immediately associated with forest warnings, irrespective of its text. The use of standardized signage, even as it transitions from hand-painted to digital formats, fosters a sense of familiarity and place-based identity. While the use of standardized signage works in favour of place-making, excessive standardization beyond public signage—such as imposing uniformity on commercial signboards—can erode regional typographic diversity (Sugita, 2018). This homogenization may dilute the cultural uniqueness embedded in local lettering traditions which tampers with the typographic identity of the region.



Figure.3 Forest department signage in Kerala-Tamil Nadu border. Credits: Ian Lockwood

2.2 The Coexistence of Latin and Malayalam Scripts

The coexistence of Latin and Malayalam scripts in Kerala's public spaces represents a compelling illustration of how historical factors and pragmatic considerations can influence a region's linguistic landscape. While the Malayalam script maintains official status and serves as the primary script for the local language, the prevalence of Latin script is notably extensive, reflecting a pattern observed across India and other formerly colonized regions. This phenomenon can be attributed to several interrelated factors. This linguistic adaptability is a response to the practical needs that came up with tourism and multilingual communities in Kerala. Why Latin for this response owes its answer to the historical legacy of Kerala as is the case with India as a whole and many other countries of the world - it's colonial past (Kachru, 1983 as cited by Jain, 2024).



Figure.4 Malayalam and Latin nameboard for a juice shop, Thiruvalla, Kerala

2.2.1 Government Use of Malayalam and Latin Scripts

The use of Malayalam and Latin scripts in Kerala's government institutions presents the complexities of multilingualism and visual communication. It is noteworthy that while government bodies strictly adhere to the use of Malayalam; as it is the official language of the state, the Kerala State Road Transport Corporation (KSRTC) bus nameplates display "KSRTC" in Latin script, with the bus routes written in Malayalam. Similarly, the logos for various government entities such as Kerala State Electricity Board (KSEB) and Kerala Tourism Development Corporation (KTDC), among others, utilize Latin script for their logos and lack a Malayalam counterpart. In contrast, government offices such as Block Panchayat and courts consistently employ Malayalam script and distinctive color combinations. This discrepancy presents a significant opportunity for typographic designers to develop multilingual logos. Discussions with sign painters reveal that government organizations have implemented stringent guidelines prohibiting the use of digital signage and flex materials. While this decision stems from sustainability considerations, it represents a valuable resource for the typographic community.



Figure.5&6 KSRTC buses with Latin “KSRTC” and route and destination in Malayalam

3. Letterforms Beyond Practicality: Emotions and Culture

3.1 Nostalgia and Familiarity

While routines are often perceived as repetitive and monotonous, they also engender a sense of security and comfort. Similarly, the lettering styles observed in the environment tend to occupy a significant place in individuals' emotional landscapes. Establishments offering comparable services often utilize similar signage when not in direct visual competition with one another. However, when physical proximity is high, the differentiation among them appears to supersede the desire to be distinguishable as a collective of vendors with a similar product range (Wachendroff, 2021).



Figure.7,8 &9 Individuals offering services all written on black background with white letters. (from left, Kochi, Kochi(Credits: Prajwal Xavier), Thiruvalla)

This utilization of similar styles creates an association between particular types of businesses and specific lettering styles, akin to government signage. When combined with the organic nature and unpredictability of hand-drawn strokes, this phenomenon contributes substantially to the emotional attachment one experiences with the surrounding letterforms. While artists, designers, and typography enthusiasts may actively notice or comment on this phenomenon, it typically occurs subconsciously for the general public. Their minds form associations that evoke a sense of familiarity; creating a shared collective memory for the people of the place.

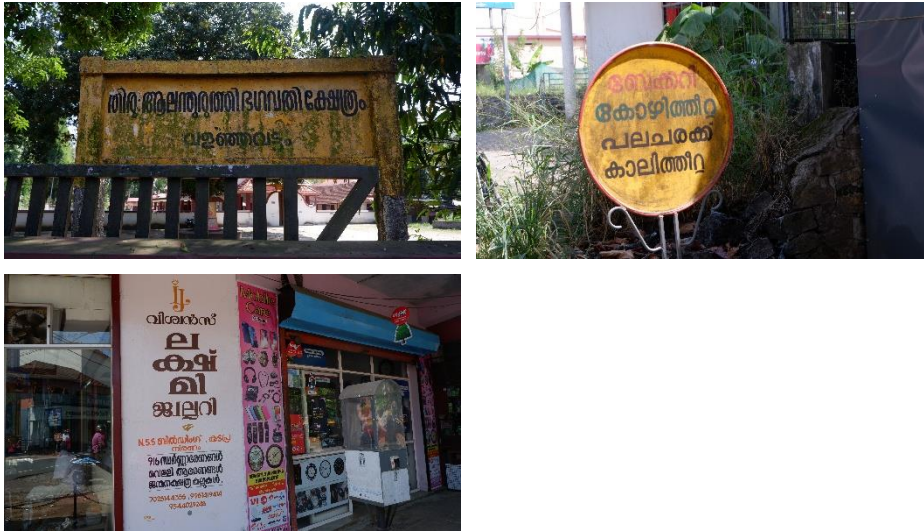


Figure.10,11&12 Hand-painted letters in Malayalam, Thiruvalla, Kerala

As hand-painted signs are experiencing a significant decline in prevalence, such styles and specimens are increasingly associated with nostalgia, thus substantiating the earlier assertion regarding the emotional resonance of letterforms.

3.2 Typography as a Cultural Artifact

Urban landscapes serves as a cultural marker, a reflection of the unique character of space and the people who live there. Vibrant neighbourhoods are characterised by distinctive letterforms (Sugita, 2018). The categorization of typography in public spaces yields five primary discourse types: regulatory (e.g., traffic signs), infrastructural (e.g., public maps), commercial (e.g., shop nameplates), transgressive (e.g., graffiti), and commemorative (e.g., tombstones) (Wachendroff, 2021). Commercial and transgressive signs significantly contribute to the formation of identity as they reflect the culture and lifestyle of the region's inhabitants. In war-affected areas, the materials used for signage may differ, indicating the availability or scarcity of certain materials during specific periods. The words, colloquialisms, and styles employed are highly informative. Influences from popular culture and literature are evident in the lettering styles utilized.

Pop culture and literature influence Kerala's typographic landscape. Film titles, which attract considerable attention from the general public, have been influenced by public signage as they reflect the culture. During elections, political promotional signs occupy a significant portion of Kerala's walls, particularly in rural areas. This phenomenon is also observed in other Indian states. Such displays are indicative of India's democratic system and underscore the importance of elections. These political graffiti have often served as a playground for artists to explore and experiment with bold styles that might not otherwise be feasible in traditional sign painting or writing.



Figure.13,14&15 Political graffiti, style experiments, Thiruvalla, Kerala

It is noteworthy that in a community where a custom marking the commencement of education, in which children inscribe "hari shree ganapataye namaha" on a plate of rice using their fingers, is highly revered—signifying the importance of letters in the culture—the letterforms surrounding people in public spaces that facilitate the smooth functioning of their lives remain largely unnoticed, with their significance unrecognized.

4. The Importance of Documenting Typography in Public Spaces

One significant challenge faced by type designers, both historically and presently, is the absence of formal documentation and archival practices. This issue extends beyond the realm of typeface designers, typographers, or designers in general; it pertains to the preservation of culture. Such documentation provides insights into regional characteristics, populations, languages, and lifestyles.

4.1 Challenges in Preservation

The decline of hand-painted lettering artistry, due to the increasing dominance of digital typography, creates a void where the art form is incomplete without the artist. Even when signs are documented, locating the artist becomes increasingly difficult. Furthermore, artists themselves often lack proper documentation of their work, which is frequently dispersed across regions or subject to repainting and modification.

There is a notable deficiency in formal archiving efforts for typography in public spaces, potentially due to its perception as a highly specialized and subject-specific field that does not align with mainstream societal concerns. However, this perception is inaccurate, as these typographic elements serve as indicators of evolution and convey narratives of

our past. Urbanization and standardization are contributing to the homogenization of signage, replacing traditional forms. Additionally, the utilization of typefaces for standardization and ease of design reproduction is counteracting the preservation of unique typographic elements.

4.2 Efforts Towards Preservation

Several noteworthy initiatives by individuals and organizations are addressing this issue. In the context of Malayalam, calligrapher Narayana Bhattathiri has dedicated his life to his mother tongue. He consistently engages in efforts to preserve, develop, and celebrate the script. Malayalam calligraphy artist Prajwal Xavier utilizes Instagram as a platform to document type specimens encountered during his travels and type walks through a segment called #TypeTuesdays. Given the popularity of his work among the younger generation of art and design enthusiasts, this approach effectively draws attention to the diverse letterforms in the environment.



Figure. 16, 17 & 18 Instagram handles of MalayalamType, Prajwal Xavier and TheKeralaTypeProject

Another initiative is an Instagram account managed by Athul Jayaraman, a typeface designer at Ek Type, Mumbai - a type foundry focused on the preservation of Indic scripts. The account, called Malayalam Type, documents various hand-painted signs and lettering encountered throughout Kerala. This project originated as a means of compiling a repository of images for reference and inspiration in type design projects. An additional initiative, also an Instagram account (with unknown account handlers) called TheKeralaTypeProject, aims to preserve the typographic history of Kerala. According to an article featuring this effort, it encompasses newspapers, magazines, nameboards, signboards, and other artifacts that incorporate handwritten or painted Malayalam letters.

5. Conclusion

Malayalam and Latin scripts coexist in Kerala's public typography, shaping regional identity and cultural memory. Hand-painted lettering and government-mandated signage contribute to place-making, while commercial and transgressive typography reflect linguistic and social diversity. Typography in public spaces go above and beyond being

mere tools for communication. It forms a connection with the people around, undoubtedly contributing to the reflection and documentation of the evolution of a region's culture. It shouldn't be restricted to subject experts or enthusiasts but expand to the general public. However, increasing digitalization and standardization threaten these rich visual traditions. This requires formal and official measures recognising the importance of scripts and, the role of the preservation of typographic history towards enriching it. Archiving efforts by individual artists and designers are crucial in preserving Kerala's typographic heritage, reinforcing the importance of letters not just as communication tools but as cultural artifacts that shape collective memory. A region's identity has many facets and layers, and the letters in it form a significant facet.

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